

News, Agenda Building, and Intelligence Agencies: A Systematic Review of the Field from the Discipline of Journalism, Media, and Communications

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Special Issue: News, agenda-building & Intelligence Agencies:
Understanding Manipulation and Methodologies

**News, Agenda-Building & Intelligence Agencies: A Systematic Review of the Field from
the Discipline of Journalism, Media and Communications**

Vian Bakir

Introduction

Within political communication research, there is a large body of work on the media's role in agenda-setting, and more nuanced agenda-building, processes. This research dates back to the 1960s (Cohen 1963) and continues to flourish today (Johnson 2013). Agenda-setting research investigates whether issues emphasized in news coverage subsequently occupy prominent positions on public or policy-makers' agendas – its hypothesis being that the media influence which issues are discussed and prioritized in society. Given that the direction of influence between media, publics and politicians has been increasingly debated, especially with the rise of the internet, social media and multiple global news channels delivering a broad range of mediated voices (Bakir 2010, Castells 2009), the more nuanced construct of *agenda-building* research examines reciprocal influences of the media, government and citizens on each other's agendas (Bakir 2013, Lang and Lang 1983, 1981). As the consequences mount from the biggest intelligence leak in history – Edward Snowden's 2013 leak of (reportedly) 1.7 million classified documents demonstrating intelligence agencies' mass surveillance of suspectless citizens and their ability to manipulate digital media – never has it been more important to understand intelligence agencies' manipulative agenda-building activities and outcomes. Yet the discipline of Journalism, Media and Communications has been remarkably silent in this field. Following a discussion of Snowden's revelations, this introduction offers a systematic review of the field of the press, agenda-building processes and intelligence agencies, delineating key aspects, and situating the contributions to this

Special Issue therein.

The Snowden Revelations: Surveillance and Media Manipulation

A media and political storm erupted in summer 2013 over National Security Agency (NSA) contractor, Edward Snowden's, whistle-blowing revelations regarding online and telephone surveillance by signals intelligence agencies from the 'Five Eyes'¹ countries - especially the USA's NSA under PRISM and the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) under TEMPORA. PRISM surveills electronic data collected directly from the servers of US Service Providers (Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, Facebook, Paltalk, AOL, Skype, YouTube, Apple), without having to request data from the service providers and without having to obtain individual court orders.² TEMPORA surveills electronic data tapped from fibre-optic underseas cables entering the UK. Together, they provide both meta-data (the 'envelope' of a communication: who it is from, when it was sent, from where, to whom and to where) and the actual content of communications (such as recordings of phone calls, the content of emails, and entries on Facebook).³ Governments insist that their methods are legal, if secret, and necessary to fight the War on Terror and organized crime (Wright and Kreissl 2013). In both the USA and UK, the telecommunications and internet corporations involved have been legally prevented from informing their users about the scope of government surveillance. As a result, in the USA, these companies have legally objected to the gag order. For instance, in October 2014, Twitter filed a lawsuit for violation of its First Amendment rights (freedom of expression) against the Federal Bureau of Investigation and US Department of Justice, arguing that their prohibition on publishing its Transparency Report on government surveillance of users "forces Twitter either to engage in speech that has been preapproved by government officials or else to refrain from speaking altogether."⁴

Snowden's revelations further show that beyond indiscriminate, mass surveillance of their own suspectless citizens (and no doubt, building on the surveillance data they collect), intelligence agencies have attempted to manipulate the social media environment using 'leaders', 'trust', 'obedience' and 'compliance' and utilizing psychological concepts familiar

to agenda-setting and agenda-building researchers, such as ‘priming’, ‘anchoring’, ‘confirmation bias’ and ‘hindsight bias’.⁵ For instance, the Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group (JTRIG), a department within GCHQ, possesses among the following tools for online covert action: ‘CLEAN SWEEP’ which can ‘Masquerade Facebook Wall Posts for individuals or entire countries’; ‘GATEWAY’ which can ‘artificially increase traffic to a website’; and ‘SLIPSTREAM’ which can inflate page views on websites’. Among its ‘techniques’ the JTRIG document describes: ‘CHANGELING’ which provides the ‘Ability to spoof any email address and send email under that identity’; and ‘HAVOK’, a ‘Real-time website cloning technique allowing on-the-fly alterations’.⁶ Whether such intelligence tools and techniques are aimed at manipulating the perceptions of, or about, key individuals (including terrorists, those suspected (but not charged or convicted) of ordinary crimes, companies and ‘hacktivists’) or wider mass audiences (such as subjects in authoritarian regimes), their deceptive nature in altering the very fabric of computational traces raises serious questions concerning our ‘ontological security’ (Giddens 1991: 66) – our basic trust in the world’s stability, and our place therein. The secrecy (until Snowden’s revelations) of such manipulative techniques discouraged public discussion of their appropriateness, legitimacy or unintended consequences. (Imagine the sociological and psychological ramifications of a heavily mediatized and digitized world, where basic trust in the authenticity and authorship of any communication beyond those conducted face-to-face, has evaporated.) While total surveillance is Orwellian, secretly altering reality to fit the lie that governments want to tell is Kafka-esque.

Snowden’s leaks highlight the hitherto limited nature of public knowledge of intelligence agencies’ contemporary techniques concerning communications surveillance and manipulative agenda-building. This situation has now changed, at least in the United States. A Pew Research Center (2014) study of US adults finds that 43% have heard ‘a lot’ about the government’s mass surveillance as part of its efforts to monitor terrorist activity; 80% ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that Americans should be concerned about the government’s monitoring; 71% of US social networking site users say that they are ‘at least somewhat concerned about

the government accessing some of the information they share on social networking sites without their knowledge'; and 88% of US adults 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that it would be very difficult to remove inaccurate information about them online. However, while debate over Snowden's revelations continues to rage in the USA, which has cherished Fourth Amendment protections, in the UK it has ignited far less attention in mainstream press (apart from the *Guardian*, which broke the story), and amongst politicians and the public. Explanations for this include Britain's more entrenched culture of official secrecy; GCHQ's central role in the mass surveillance; and the extensive political pressure from UK's Cameron-Clegg administration on the *Guardian* for its role in publicizing the Snowden leaks (Greenwald 2014, Harding 2014). While research has yet to establish direct impacts on public opinion of this media management, a series of public opinion polls in the UK finds that, unlike the Americans, the British public does not have a strong or favorable opinion of the Snowden leaks. For instance, an Angus Reid Global October 2013 survey of American, Canadian and British adults finds that when asked to assume that their national government routinely conducts electronic surveillance of the general public, while 60% of Americans and Canadians describe this as 'unacceptable', Britons were more split (52% unacceptable versus 48% acceptable) (Wright and Kreissl 2013: 25). A TNS poll from January 2014 finds that 64% of the British public thinks that British intelligence agencies should be allowed to access and store the internet communications of criminals or terrorists by monitoring the communications of the public at large (TNS 2014). A YouGov poll in April 2014 finds that while 46% of British adults think it is 'good for society' that newspapers reported on the Snowden leaks, 31% do not know, and 22% think it is 'bad for society' (YouGov 2014). That Snowden's revelations prompted an internationally uneven response from mainstream media, politicians and publics to their intelligence agencies' activities indicates that these agenda-building nodes have nationally specific relational dynamics.

The Press, Agenda-building & Intelligence Agencies: State of the Field

Recent studies from the inter-disciplinary field of Intelligence Studies have attempted to

systematically analyze and theorize the relationships between these agenda-setting nodes, albeit from an exclusively American perspective. Johnson (2014) highlights that in the US there are correlations between levels of media coverage and the degree of energetic intelligence oversight exercised by government officials: low oversight if a low level of media coverage, moderate if moderate, and high if high. Correlation, of course, does not prove causation or furnish explanations. Media coverage, for instance, may neither reflect nor be caused by intelligence oversight activities, but rather may result from officially authorized intelligence leaks designed to further a specific agenda-builder's strategic aims (Bakir 2013). As Hastedt (2005) discusses, intelligence leaks in the USA may variously be: 'promotional', where secret intelligence is leaked episodically and is uncontested, to highlight oneself or a policy problem, or to defend or distance oneself from a policy failure; 'orchestrated', carried out on a sustained basis, uncontested and systematically leaked to advance a policy position; 'warring', leaked by opposing sides on a sustained and contested basis to wear challengers down; and 'entrepreneurial', used by disputing sides to advance or block a policy. Reflecting more broadly on the role of the press in intelligence oversight, Hillebrand (2012) suggests that news media may variously act as: an information transmitter and stimulator for formal scrutinizers; a substitute watchdog, where official oversight bodies are unwilling, or incapable, of scrutinizing; a legitimizer, to reassure the public about intelligence agencies' work; or a lapdog, failing to sufficiently question government policies or transmitting unsubstantiated government claims. That the inter-disciplinary field of Intelligence Studies has started to theorize intelligence agencies' manipulative agenda-building activities is not before time, given that covert manipulation of publics, press and foreign governments has long been a function of intelligence agencies (Dover and Goodman 2009). Yet, despite the fact that within political communication more broadly, there is an accumulation of research into the media's agenda-setting and agenda-building role, a systematic review of the discipline of Journalism, Media and Communications finds little examining the field of the press, agenda-building processes & intelligence agencies.

To conduct the systematic review (Petticrew and Roberts 2006), 16 journals, ranging from long-standing to recently established, and broad disciplinary leaders to specialized niche journals, were selected from the discipline of Journalism, Media and Communications (see Table 1). Using the keyword ‘intelligence’, the entire archives of each of these journals was searched up until December 2014, retaining only those that centrally addressed intelligence agencies and agenda-building *processes*. Of these articles centrally on the field, none explicitly utilize the agenda-setting hypothesis, or the more nuanced agenda-building framework, a testimony to the difficulty of detecting agenda-building by intelligence agencies given their secretive and sometimes mendacious nature. More articles, however, deal with influence more broadly defined. They use terminology such as psychological operations/warfare, information operations/warfare, propaganda, public relations, strategic (political) communication, censorship, public diplomacy, indexing and framing – all elements that are implicitly or explicitly part of agenda-building processes. For the purpose of this systematic review, research articles using all such terminology were deemed relevant if they addressed the reciprocal influences between any of the nodes of the press, the public and politicians on the one hand, and intelligence or intelligence agencies on the other.⁷

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Each *journal*’s attention to the field was calculated by dividing the total number of articles centrally on the field in that journal by the total number of articles in that journal’s archive from its start of publication to December 2014.⁸ The extent to which the *discipline* of Journalism, Media and Communications addresses the field was derived by dividing the total number of articles on the field in the 16 journals, by the total number of articles published since the start of each of these journals to December 2014. Table 1 shows that the discipline has only 23 articles centrally on the field, this comprising just 0.1% of the discipline’s articles, quantifying how rarely the field is addressed. To date, the journal leading the discipline with 1.3% of its articles centrally on the field is *Journalism & Communication*

Monographs (1999-2014): however, this relatively high percentage reflects its tiny archive (79 articles), so that just one article centrally on the field (Sweeney and Washburn 2014) delivers a relatively high percentage. No single journal offers more than three articles centrally on the field – even journals with large archives such as *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*'s (1955-2014) 4,029 articles. Two of the more niche journals - *Crime, Media, Culture* (2005-2014) and *Media, War & Conflict* (2008-14) – are surprisingly silent, given the increasing importance of intelligence in fighting crime and terrorism (Carter and Carter 2009, Niva 2013). That *New Media & Society* (1999-2014) fails to produce any articles centrally on the field again underscores the surprise of Snowden's revelations regarding surveillance and manipulation of the digital realm. From the 23 journal articles centrally addressing the field, several features are noteworthy.

1. Intelligence agencies' techniques of, and success in, manipulating different agenda-building nodes involving the press. By far the most common theme addressed is intelligence agencies' manipulative agenda-building techniques. These comprise censorship (reinforced by legislation and courts) (Dee 1989, Sweeney & Washburn 2014); the creation of propaganda-oriented policy, institutions and organizational machinery (Barth 1943, Hawkins Jr. and Pettie 1943); financially supporting foreign news services, usually covertly (Barker 2008, Fletcher 1982, Granville 2004, Soley 1982, Sussman 2007); providing propagandistic content for the foreign press to persuade foreign publics (Fletcher 1982, Vaughan 2002); using the press as cover for agents overseas (Fletcher 1982); disinformation and psychological warfare persuasive techniques, often based on forgeries and deceptions (Barker 2008, Boyd-Barrett 2004, Martin 1982); spying on journalists (Alwood 2007, Masaharu 1999); blacklisting and harassing media employees (Spaulding 2009); cultivating sympathetic journalists (Alwood 2010, Boyd-Barrett 2004); and selective authorized leaks, declassification and misdirection (Lashmar 2013).

This Special Issue adds to this literature on intelligence agencies' manipulative agenda-building activities regarding the press. Clila Magen's chapter demonstrates that media strategies applied by Israel's intelligence community include secrecy, silencing, exploitation of patriotism, cooptation and psychological warfare. However, while we are building an understanding of intelligence agencies' manipulative agenda-building activities regarding the press, less well understood, as media environments digitize and globalize, and as mainstream and social media converge, is how intelligence agencies' manipulative techniques adapt to changing media environments. This gap is addressed by Emma Briant's chapter. Focusing on American and British propaganda strategies to deal with global asymmetric threats post-9/11, Briant elucidates the challenges to democratic restrictions on, and oversight of, propaganda given the fluidity of audiences in globalized media environments; and given how the USA and UK coordinate their propaganda to exploit mutual domestic propaganda restrictions and strengths.

2. Journalists' practices and challenges in dealing with intelligence. Less than half of the articles centrally on the field deal with journalists' practices and challenges in engaging with intelligence agencies, agents, sources and products. Journalistic practices in this area range from collaborative to oppositional. Collaborative practices include journalists acting as intelligence informants (Alwood 2010, 2007); spreading intelligence-sourced propaganda (Boyd-Barrett 2004); and formalized or semi-formal agreements with intelligence agencies on how they are sourced (Lashmar 2013). Collaborative journalistic practices also include tone of news coverage. This ranges from uncritical reporting of intelligence agencies stemming from high faith in government, as in the US in the 2000s (Bakir 2011), to corporate journalists reaching an artificial consensus on intelligence events to avoid appearing incorrect in their own assessments (McCoy 2001). Research into oppositional journalistic practices is comparatively rare, comprising just two articles. One examines how journalists exposed secret policies on torture and extraordinary rendition in the Bush administration's War on Terror (Tulloch 2007). The other examines how a US newspaper, the *Chicago Tribune*,

legally challenged the US government's attempted use of the Espionage Act in WWII for the *Tribune's* front-page account of the Battle of Midway (Sweeney & Washburn 2014).

Journalists' main challenges in dealing with intelligence revolve around finding, understanding and verifying information. This includes gaining access to knowledgeable sources, especially where intelligence agents face prosecution if discovered to have leaked classified information, and when sources may intentionally mix truths with lies (Gup 2004, Wheelwright 2014). Another challenge is having the time and expertise to recognize disinformation (Boyd-Barrett 2004, Wheelwright 2014). Thus, the source-journalist relationship, long-studied by sociologists of journalism (Gans 1979), faces heightened difficulties regarding access, verification and trust when concerned with intelligence agencies.

Interest in journalists' practices in dealing with intelligence agencies continues in this Special Issue, with the predominant finding again being journalistic collaboration rather than opposition. Stephen Dorril analyses the covert relationship between foreign correspondents and Britain's Secret Intelligence Service during the Cold War, establishing that journalists were recruited as agents and used intelligence-derived material in their news articles. Moving into the contemporary period, Lada Trifanova Price addresses the past and present role and status of Bulgarian journalists who collaborated with the communist secret service during Bulgaria's communist past. Locating her study within debates on transitional justice, she concludes that Bulgarian journalists are still affected by the influence of former communist spies on the Bulgarian media. Justin Schlosberg examines the limits of British journalism's watchdog performance in its failure to properly hold to account the British national security state. Locating his study within debates on news framing and ideological power, his analysis of public service broadcasting news coverage of allegations of corruption by British AeroSpace Systems with respect to an arms deal indicates that broadcasters were complicit in an official strategy to bring closure to the story.

3. *The public's role in press-related agenda-building on intelligence issues.* This is examined in only one fifth of journal articles centrally on the field, and only as a sideline to the article's

main focus. These include evaluations of intelligence agencies' means of targeting, and claims of influencing public opinion via the press (Barth 1943, Browne 1966, Sussman 2007); and public perceptions of press-mediated intelligence agencies, agents, sources and information (Gup 2004, McCoy 2001). For instance, Gup (2004) notes that journalists face difficulties convincing citizens that they have a legitimate and vested interest in keeping abreast of intelligence conduct. In contrast, McCoy (2001) notes that talk shows and online fora showed that African Americans were outraged by US news revelations in 1996 of links between the spread of crack cocaine in the US and fundraising for the CIA-backed contra rebels in Central America. Thus, the limited research that exists on the public's views of intelligence agencies and their activities ranges from stances of ignorance and apathy to conspiracy theories. Since these articles were published, there has been further democratization of the production and distribution of media content through the rise of social media and whistle-blowing websites, allowing publics to take a more active agenda-building role. It is of increasing importance, then, that we address the research lacuna on the public's agenda-building role regarding intelligence issues. This Special Issue begins this process with Jie Qin's chapter. Qin examines Snowden's portrayal on Twitter versus mainstream news finds that social media users associated Snowden's case with other whistleblowers, bipartisan issues, and personal privacy issues, these independent frames all favoring Snowden. This contrasted with mainstream news whose discourse was more unified, connecting the Snowden incident with issues of national security and international relations, and framing him a traitor.

4. Methodological patterns and issues. Standard techniques for studying media agenda-setting and agenda-building in political communication are framing (Entman 1993, 2004) and indexing (Bennett, 1990; Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston 2007). Yet, their relevance for studying intelligence agencies' role in this process is questionable, as secrecy, misdirection and disinformation make difficult establishing broad, causal agenda-building links (Bakir 2013). Certainly, none of the 23 studies centrally about the field use these techniques. The

only article predominantly employing textual analysis of media content (McCoy 2001) identifies qualitative themes in the press, but does not systematically link these to the agendas of the public, politicians or intelligence agencies. Other rarely-used methods in this field include interviews (only 4 articles), indicating that access is a significant barrier (McCoy 2001, Sweeney & Washburn 2014, Tulloch 2007, Wheelwright, 2014); reflective, insider accounts (2 articles, from a journalist and a documentary-maker) attesting to the prevalence of secrecy (Lashmar 2013, Wheelwright 2014); and researcher-generated public opinion polling or other means of audience measurement (totally absent). Lengthy declassification periods for intelligence-related matters (Dacre, Cannadine & Pilling 2009) explain why, with 11 articles, the historical approach is among the most popular of methods (Alwood 2007, 2010, Fletcher 1982, Granville 2004, Martin 1982, Masaharu 1999, Soley 1982, Spaulding 2009, Sussman 2007, Sweeney & Washburn 2014, Vaughan 2002). This reflects the methodological trend in intelligence studies *per se* (Scott and Jackson 2004). The other most popular method, also with 11 articles, is the case study (Bakir 2011, Barker 2008, Barth 1943, Boyd-Barrett 2004, Browne 1966, Dee 1989, Fletcher 1982, Gup 2004, Hawkins Jr. & Pettee 1943, Lashmar 2013, McCoy 2001). Its popularity stems from its maximization of context and specialization in understanding contradictory details from multiple sources, as these are ideal attributes for unraveling intelligence agencies' agenda-building processes.

Most of the articles in this Special Issue echo some of these more common methodological approaches. For instance, most use the case study approach, although always in conjunction with other methods, showing a healthy, and hitherto rare, focus on the contemporary, rather than historical, moment. Importantly, articles in this Special Issue also utilize and advance methods rarely used by the field. While standard tools of indexing and framing for unpicking agenda-building processes are often confounded when the agenda-builders are, or concern, the intelligence agencies, Schlosberg successfully uses elements of framing and content analysis in conjunction with critical discourse analysis and a longitudinal case study, to reveal journalism's ultimate complicity in the national security state. Framing analysis is also used and methodologically advanced in Qin's study which introduces a

method not yet used by the field – semantic network analysis. In doing so, he shows how the conceptualisation of frames, the mechanism of the framing process and the operationalisation of framing analysis needs to be reconsidered when analysing social media. Thus, Schlosberg and Qin both show that framing can be adequately used for studying this field, as long as the method is combined with other methods, or redeveloped to suit the context examined. While interviews are rarely used in studying this field, often due to the unwillingness or inability of involved parties to participate, we are fortunate to have three articles that centrally rely on interviews (Briant, Magen, Trifanova Price).

Conclusion

This Special Issue advances the field by adding seven new articles – increasing the field's size by 30% and clearly delineating the field. They progress understanding both of relatively well-trodden areas (intelligence agencies' techniques of, and success in, manipulating different agenda-building nodes involving the press, particularly in the USA), and less frequently researched areas (journalists' practices and challenges in dealing with intelligence; the public's role in press-related agenda-building on intelligence issues; and non-US contexts). Methodologically, these articles rescue the relevance of framing and indexing (the standard techniques for studying media agenda-setting and agenda-building) via methodological combination and development. While confirming the continuing utility of historical and case study approaches, they also significantly add to the body of work using interviews, indicating that securing access is not an insurmountable problem. As Snowden's revelations continue to reverberate, this Special Issue provides substantial food for thought regarding the national and international contexts, histories, practices, impacts and accountability of intelligence agencies' agenda-building activities involving the press and wider media environments. Importantly, they demonstrate how such secretive and mendacious processes can be productively researched.

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¹ The 'Five Eyes' is a partnership of signals intelligence agencies from the USA (NSA), UK (GCHQ), Canada (Communications Security Establishment Canada), Australia (Australian Signals Directorate) and New Zealand (Security Intelligence Service).

² Greenwald, G. and E. MacAskill (2013) NSA Prism program taps in to user data of Apple, Google and others. *Guardian* [7 June 2013]. Available at:

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³ MacAskill, E. et al. (2013) GCHQ taps fibre-optic cables for secret access to world's communication. *Guardian* [21 June 2013]. Available at:

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⁴ Boyd, A. (2014) Twitter files First Amendment lawsuit against DOJ, FBI. *DefenseNews* [7 October]. Available at:

<http://www.defensenews.com/article/M3/20141007/IT/310070024/Twitter-files-First-Amendment-lawsuit-against-DOJ-FBI>

⁵ Greenwald, G. (2014) DISPATCHES. How Covert Agents Infiltrate the Internet to Manipulate, Deceive, and Destroy Reputations. *The Intercept* [24 February 2014]. Available at: <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2014/02/24/jtrig-manipulation>

⁶ JTRIG (2014) JTRIG Tools and Techniques. *The Intercept* [14 July 2014]. Available at: <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/document/2014/07/14/jtrig-tools-techniques/>

⁷ While this systematic review leaves out book-length research monographs, a recent narrative review (Dover and Goodman 2009) observes that there has been little sustained academic analysis of the wider relationship between the media and intelligence agencies. To date, Bakir (2013) is the only book-length research monograph to have centrally grappled with the field of the press, agenda-building processes and intelligence agencies.

⁸ The number of articles in each journal's archive was calculated by multiplying the journal's total number of issues by the average number of articles per issue (this, in turn, derived from a sample of 9 separate issues chosen randomly across each journal's archive).